

THE *Final Straw*

A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW

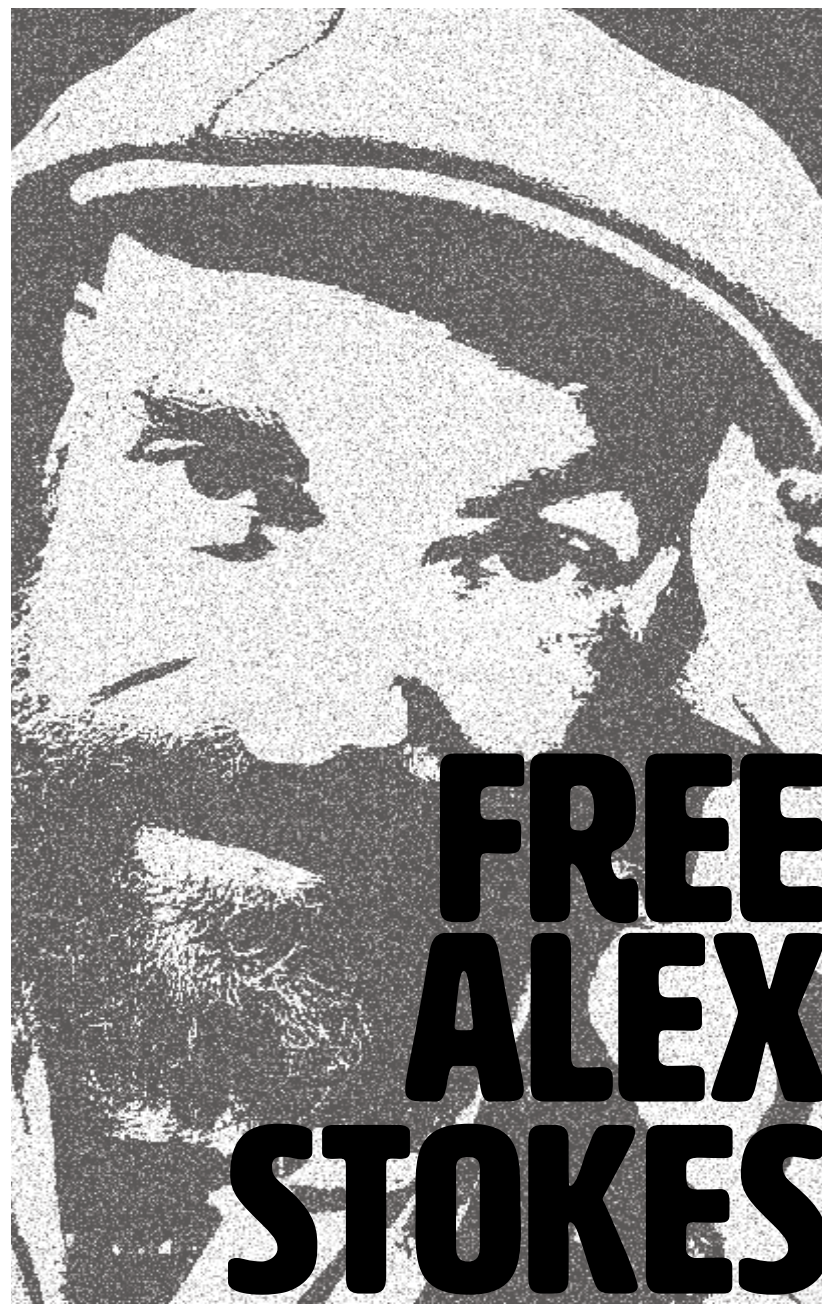
The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. You can send us letters at:

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The Final Straw Radio - February 4, 2024

MEGHAN: Yeah, you can contact us through the website.

TFSR: *Well, was there anything that I didn't ask about that you wanted to talk about? Anything that I didn't cover that like occurring view that you want to get out in this chat?*

MEGHAN: I don't know. I want to say that Alex has never really misrepresenteded himself. I think that there's been a lot of those allegations directly from the district attorneys, as well as the assumptions in the media. He's always been just acting as himself. He was involved in these causes because he cares about people. His supporters are nonviolent people themselves. We all have day jobs.

I think it's really important to share his story, I think there's definitely some factors about this that make it a little special. When it comes down to the legal system, it really just railroads everybody, and it doesn't care about what your situation was at the time, they will look for the worst of it, they will overcharge you, you will get the option of a really shitty plea deal or worse.

LO: I think the one thing that people on all sides have been able to bond over, they've all had the same question. They don't understand the sentence. They don't understand the 20 years. That confuses everybody. They're like, "How could this have happened? How did this happen?" I remember at first people were like, "Well, isn't this the capital of New York? And aren't we in New York?" They just didn't understand why this happened the way it did.

TFSR: *Yeah, I mean, it's ridiculous and also scary. I'm really glad that he's getting this retrial. As scary as that is to have to go through all those steps again.*

LO: We are hoping, I mean, we don't know what's going to happen yet.

MEGHAN: Please share his story.

TFSR: *Thank you so much, both of you, for talking and for taking the time. Good luck. Fingers crossed.*

LO: Thank you. Thank you for amplifying his story. We really appreciate that. Yeah, absolutely.

MEGHAN: Thank you.

TFSR: *Absolutely. It's slightly off topic, maybe, but can you talk a little bit about the Victory Garden? I don't know if you know the history of it or not.*

LO: It was started by Greg and Jody Sheldon. It's urban gardening and it provides food for the people of that community in Albany. During the height of the pandemic, Alex was somebody who delivered that food.

MEGHAN: He kept that going himself.

LO: Sometimes I look back, and I'm like, "how did this happen?" In between January 6 and his trial, he won an award with them, for Albany Victory Gardens, he won an award from the mayor of Rensselaer for his artwork.

MEGHAN: He had 21 letters of support after his conviction before his sentencing. They were from organizers, business owners, a bunch of professionals,

LO: All walks of life. I saw the look on the face of one of the prosecutors and she looked very surprised. She was holding the letters in her hand and she kind of looked up and it just was not what she was expecting at all. It was a folder full of support.

TFSR: *Amazing. I guess, to jump back to the letter writing, for folks that are considering writing to Alex, are there any subjects that they should maybe hold back from talking about? Are there things that Alex likes talking about, in particular, like areas of interest that they could really engage him in the letter writing process, any of that sort of stuff?*

LO: I mean, he has varied interests.

MEGHAN: Varied interests. I would say that we linked on the website, the instructions from the New York State Correctional Services about what not to do, and how to send the mail. There is a limit of how many pages for that. He likes news, he likes history. I don't know how much they're selecting from different news articles and whatnot, or how much that's censored, comics, he loves those. He likes lots of science and Popular Mechanics types of articles.

LO: He's teaching himself how to play guitar in there. He was able to order a guitar and he was teaching himself how to play harmonica. He loves receiving blues songs in the mail, different things like that, rock songs, kind of all over the map.

The website is, for those of you out there who might not have seen it yet, It's FreeAlexStokes.com If you have any questions, you can go throughout the website and get the questions answered.

Free Alex Stokes

THIS WEEK ON THE SHOW, WE'RE STARTING OUT WITH AN INTERVIEW with Lo and Meghan, two supporters of Jewish independent journalist, artist and antifascist leftist from Albany, NY, Alex Stokes Contompasis. Alex is serving a 20 year sentence for defending himself and 3 other community members attacked by Proud Boys and Oath Keepers at the New York state capital on January 6th, 2021. For the hour, we speak with Lo and Meghan, two friends and supporters of Alex who talk about Alex's media work, the politically-charged court case and his ongoing appeal. More on his case can be found at **FreeAlexStokes.Com**, you can order his artwork to support his case there as well. They mentioned getting support & attention from the International Anti-Fascist Defence Fund.

TFSR: *I'm joined by two folks supporting Anti-Fascist political prisoner Alex Stokes, to speak about Alex, his case and how to support him. Thanks a lot for joining me! Would you mind introducing yourselves to the audience with any names, gender pronouns, location, relationship, or other info that might help identify you for the listeners?*

MEGHAN: Hi, I'm Megan, She/Her, I am from Albany, New York, and I'm a family friend of Alex Stokes. I know his whole family.

LO: My name is Lo, I go by They/Them, I am an advocate for Alex, and happy to be a part of the Free Alex Stokes Project. I'm also in Albany.

TFSR: *Thanks so much, both of you, for making the time for this. Would you tell us a bit about Alex? His personality, his passions, his work? It sounds like you've known him for a while, so anything to help ground the audience in a sense of who this person is that we're going to be talking about.*

LO: He's an artist, a musician, a poet, a writer. He has a passion for social justice and equality. He's somebody who was very prominent in his community, and did a lot of work for the community, whether it was the Red Bookshelf, or the Albany Victory Gardens, or different organizations like that that he was a part of before his incarceration.

MEGHAN: He did a lot of freelance or independent journalism, he had his own Public Access Channel television show, and he set up the news. He would go around to Albany recording lots of local events. He named the program after his family's business. So, it was News World Albany Banana Corps, since his father was a banana middleman dealer for many years.

TFSR: *Is it okay to say banana dealer?*

MEGHAN: I was gonna ask you that? [Laughs]

LO: They used to have a market and it was many generations.

TFSR: *There is a YouTube link to an episode that is up on the support site that listeners can watch.*

MEGHAN: We have several original episodes that he broadcast himself, so go to that through the site, but there is the seven-year highlights reel. So that is actually across the seven years of his filming smooshed into a good 40-minute video.

MEGHAN: We don't know why we said 3,000.

LO: It seemed like a good number at the time.

TFSR: *Yeah.*

MEGHAN: I was curious, and we looked it up. Heather Heyer is his best-selling portrait right now. Prince gets a lot of views as well. He's in second place.

LO: For people who have been close to Alex throughout the years, they know how much emotion he put into the Heather Heyer one. What didn't get talked about a trial at all is his work, as we said, but also the experiences that he had doing that work. He was there as Heather Heyer died. He watched her die and then he created this beautiful portrait of her. Stuff like that was never really discussed.

They tried to keep it 'not political,' as they said even though the Judge did a 10-minute political speech at the end of everything. It was in the newspaper, too. So, everybody saw that he talked in a political way at the end. They weren't allowed to say certain words, they weren't allowed to say certain phrases. His trial lawyer, Jasper Mills, was very limited in what he could do for Alex, in certain situations. They tried to focus on the violence instead of the day instead of the circumstances. Stuff like that.

TFSR: *With this upcoming appeal, then it sounds like that's probably where the next question is gonna go. What is the Support Project working on right now? Clearly, you've answered that question. This is the next big thing.*

Besides contributing to the fundraiser and buying those prints, what are some ways that people in the listening audience can support Alex and those of you that are supporting Alex through this right now?

LO: Writing letters to him. He loves receiving mail.

MEGHAN: There's lots of local organizations in Albany that Alex supported. These are organizations that were primarily directed at helping people immediately. If you want to support Albany Victory Gardens, or the Red Bookshelf, or Community Matters 518, or your own local Black Lives Matter activists, that would be huge.

There is a story about that Alex that I like sharing, and that I say, "Lots of us can say Black lives matter," but Alex helped carry the hospital bed up to the second-floor apartment of a young man who was shot and paralyzed by the Albany police. So, he does things like that. He will help you. Hospital beds are heavy.

serves the full eight, or vice versa. Parole would be reduced if that happened. It wouldn't totally go away, but it'd be reduced.

Then what is looking like it might happen is a new trial. Everything would start all over again, bail would start all over again, trial dates would start all over again, the plea would happen again. It's too hard to tell right now, exactly how the third appellate in New York State wants to tackle this. But we're almost there.

MEGHAN: It's exciting, like you said, almost there. We'll know this time, a year from now, we'll have answers, at least. It looks like at some point in the second half of this year, you'll hear more about the appeal and the answers to it. I know everyone wants to see the everything; people want to read the transcripts. I understand that but not yet. You just gotta wait. The judges have to look at it first.

TFSR: *What's the appeal based on? Is it based on an unfair sentencing? Is it based on withholding of evidence? The jury handling? Or can you talk about that?*

MEGHAN: How about all of those?

LO: There are eight points. That's all I can really go into. I could give you a comparison from what I understand. I'm totally new to this. I had to like learn everything really fast. From what I understand, usually, an appeal has two to three, what they call 'merits' or sections. This one has eight. So that just gives you an idea of what happened during trial and what happened preceding trial.

TFSR: *Cool. That's really great news that I was not expecting. [laughs]*

LO: Thank everyone who has contributed to his legal fund, it has been super vital. Alex thanks you. We're very appreciative of everyone who has bought prints, who's donated, it's seriously been essential.

MEGHAN: Thanks to the international Anti-Fascist Defense Fund, because they advertised Alex's case. It really helped a lot too.

TFSR: *I assume you're still fundraising because this is an uphill battle from here and everything restarted. So, Alex is quite an accomplished painter, you mentioned that he's an artist. Can you talk about the print fundraiser project? What that entails some of the images that are on there, etc.?*

LO: Sure, yeah. There are people that have influenced Alex throughout his life, whether they were civil rights people, or musicians, or people who stood up and resisted, basically.

TFSR: *This is gonna sound weird, but could you describe what cable access is? There might be a generational gap where some people are not familiar with it.*

MEGHAN: Yes, the generational gap. My kids call it "live TV", because you used to only be able to watch TV when it was on and there was something called 'Public Access' where on Channel three, or Channel Four, something like that, where there would just be a block of time and people could buy up those hours and then publicize whatever they wanted on their TV hours. So sometimes you would see lots of talk shows. Before there were independent podcasts, it would be on a public access TV. Ours in Albany was located in the basement of the Albany Public Library.

TFSR: *Yeah, that's cool. It takes a lot of effort to produce just an audio thing, like this show. But producing video, recording clips, editing them, being in studio and recording a live segment with someone else doing commentary...That's a lot of work for someone to put in. So, the fact that he was doing it over seven years to inform the community around social justice issue really says a lot about his personality. It's pretty funny.*

MEGHAN: Yes, they are very funny. After watching several of them over the summer, I said it was "like a love letter to Albany." You can just tell how much he loves this town. The fact that he's walking all over the place filming it.

TFSR: *Can you talk a bit about the Proud Boys and other Far Right groups who showed up in Albany on January 6, 2021? What was known about what was happening in other places? What had these groups like Proud Boys done before in Albany? And what do you know about Alex's prior relationship to them as a media maker, or an activist in the community?*

LO: Well, one that day they were under the umbrella of the Uncle Sam Proud Boys, which at the time was a chapter out of Troy, New York. It was a 'Stop the Steal' rally that day, just like all the other capital cities as we found out later. It was a coordinated effort by the Proud Boys all over the country. The Proud Boys were looked at as the 'security', essentially for the Oathkeepers in the 1776-ers that were at the 'Stop the Steal' rally. That was kind of like their role, especially that day.

There had been problems before in Troy, and at certain protests in Troy. Albany was a different battleground, I guess you could say. He (Alex) had been learning that they were, as we all know, very dangerous people and he was just trying to be there in case he needed to keep people safe.

TFSR: *This sort of thing was happening in places all around the country. All the all eyes were on DC, but groups were showing up, or had threatened to show up, in*

capitals around the country. There was a major fear that there was going to be some sort of coup d'état, some sort of coordinated mass violence that was going to occur.

So, to your knowledge, was Alex showing up as a media personality to cover this, as a community activist, or some other capacity? Could you explain what happened to him there?

LO: He was there as both a community member and as a journalist. He had been taking pictures that day. There was a Black counter-protester there who had his hands in his pockets the whole time and there was a verbal exchange between him and a Proud Boy. This particular Proud Boy was the initial aggressor, and he took out an illegal grade taser, and tased this man in the neck, because he “felt threatened.” Then a melee broke out. There were different MAGA people, Proud Boys, it was a whole bunch of people that were beating up the counter protesters to that ‘Stop the Steal’ rally.

Alex intervened and he had to, in that situation, in self-defense and the defense of others around him, use extraordinary measures unfortunately. He was just trying to keep people safe and make sure everybody survived. It was a really, really bad attack on their part. It’s crazy how these things go sometimes. It lasted about what 45 seconds. It was so fast.

However, there was a special agent there. She hid behind a tree. She didn’t intervene at all. Everybody at the protest was there without any other types of law enforcement present. They [police] were nowhere in East Capitol Park. We found out later that they had been on the perimeter of East Capitol Park, but they were not actually present until after the incident had happened.

Kevin Metcalf, he’s an independent journalist in Canada, he put together a really great slideshow of what happened. He took video from the two towers from that day. There was a north and south tower, and he combined the video together to show exactly what happened piece by piece.

There were Proud Boys that got hurt and Alex, a few minutes later, was arrested. The Proud Boys were not searched, they weren’t charged with anything. It was basically like, “Okay, you’re free to go. Let’s just let you go.” The two Proud Boys who had injuries ended up going to the hospital.

TFSR: *I absolutely understand somebody’s having to intervene to stop violence, supposedly that’s what the police are supposed to do in this situation, right? Not just stand by the side and then pick off people after damage has been done. How serious were the injuries to the people who got hospitalized?*

LO: There was one Proud Boy who got injured and was out that night. There was another Proud Boy, the one who had been beating Alex into the concrete, he also broke Alex’s wrist. This Proud Boy had injuries to his abdomen and it did take him some more time to recover. But, after about six weeks, he was back to being an EMT doing 12-hour shifts.

TFSR: *Probably a case of police just being racist, but also trying to try to do the ‘both sides’ thing.*

So, nobody died on this day in Albany. Thank goodness. At least two people died, including one protester and one law enforcement officer in DC. Different jurisdiction, obviously, different prison system, different judges, but do you have any comparisons to prosecutions for folks that were convicted in DC at the time, like Tarrío who led the Proud Boys?

LO: Enrique got 22 (years).

TFSR: *He did? Okay.*

LO: That’s another thing too, that people within our friend group and other people who are hearing Alex’s story, they don’t really understand. They’re very confused by it, especially if they know Alex very well. Enrique Tarrío got 22 years and three years parole. It’s almost like there’s this crazy false equivalency that develops somehow. It’s beyond comprehension to us. We don’t know how this happened. It’s kind of like a nightmare. It just doesn’t make sense to us how that could have happened. I mean, Enrique Tarrío, he was tried as a terrorist.

MEGHAN: It seems like they did this last-ditch effort to say, “And he’s just as bad.” I felt like there was this false equivalency that Alex was just this Left-wing Proud Boy and here’s his social media, or something. But he wasn’t a member of any organization. His ideology was to help people and he was just always afraid of somebody getting hurt at one of these things.

LO: He just always wanted to make sure everybody was safe, because everybody has the right to protest.

MEGHAN: In his own videos I don’t see him threatening the cops or pointing weapons at them or anything like that. He seemed to be able to get along with everybody and move through really contentious crowds.

TFSR: *Does Alex have any legal steps available to him at this point short of pardon or commutation?*

LO: He does! He has an appeal that is probably going to be completed and submitted by the time you submit your interview. It’s that close to being done. It’s very strong appeal. We’re hopeful. There are a few ways that he could ‘win.’ The first, obviously, we want the dismissal. That would be amazing, but we also know how rare that is in this country, especially at this time, in 2024. Then the other two options could be that the 12-year sentence gets knocked off, then he

MEGHAN: I bought one at a gas station in anticipation of this interview just to prove my point.

TFSR: *Can you speak about some of the other people that were arrested on January 6 in Albany? Who they were what happened to them?*

MEGHAN: Yeah, so on the scene, the MAGA man with the pole who hit the woman was arrested on the scene and later released. The two people that were attacked, the man who was tased in the neck, and the Black man who had at least up to three guys jumping on him at once, they were arrested on the scene as well. Also, one activist was arrested after he showed up after the whole event was over. They said he walked past the tape or something like that. He was roughed up by the police, his whole face was bruised and scuffed up. He said that they put a knee on the back of his neck during this.

TFSR: *That's pretty crazy. Did those folks get charges pressed against them and have to do any time for what happened? The person who got attacked, as you mentioned, who was tased? Or the person who allegedly went into an area of investigation past the tape?*

MEGHAN: I think that all the charges were basically ACOD'd which is a delay/dismissal, Adjournment in contemplation of dismissal. So basically, eventually the charges were dismissed. I'm not 100% sure on all of those cases how they were resolved, but I think it did involve ACOD's. I can't imagine how traumatic it must have been to be attacked and then be arrested after you were the one who was attacked. Just really wanted to mention that the cops arrested all the Black people when they finally showed up.

TFSR: *Yeah, and roughed them up, as you said, too.*

MEGHAN: Yeah, yeah. In the Albany Proper video, there's a documentation of it.

TFSR: *The one from the two different towers that you mentioned. There was video from one tower, one corner of the park and video from another and they were sort of like synchronized, to show what happened throughout the protests.*

MEGHAN: I don't think the jury saw anything about like the aftermath of what happened there. There was an article by independent newspaper that detailed what Alex accused the police of and had a photo of him, that he was really marked up from it. He was the one who walked past the tape who wasn't there for any of the incident.

MEGHAN: I mean, the injury was significant, and it's true had been left untreated, it would have caused probably death. But he was treated and back and working as an EMT, according to his own testimony about six weeks later, the following month.

LO: Each instance throughout the melee, because I know it can be a little bit hard to follow, the Proud Boys were the initial aggressors every time. Every single time. They were causing the harm to the counter-protesters that were there.

TFSR: *As you said, Alex was being pounded into the concrete by this individual, for someone to defend themselves in order to stop that violence seems pretty reasonable. If the person can now work as an EMT, long shifts, and isn't permanently impacted, then they got off pretty easy.*

You said that Alex was arrested after the Melee broke up. Can you talk about Alex's experience after January 6, as a defendant, as a survivor of violence, as a public individual and a journalist, and what was his trial like?

LO: It was rough, it was rough. It was an extremely intense experience.

MEGHAN: First of all, the press just went wild with it and called him an 'Antifa Stabber' basically, and grabbed some screenshots or whatever from his social media posts, and really tried to play him up as a really big dangerous guy. It's kind of laughable. I do want to say I've known Alex since he was 12 years old, he's been carrying a knife in his pocket for 20 years. They really wanted to make a big deal that there must have been intent for him to bring a knife there. He had a knife, he probably had his wallet, he was probably wearing socks, just like any other day out. My uncle has carried a knife with him for 40 years. Something in my personal opinion that lots of people who work with their hands often have these small little tools on them. It was a pocketknife. It was two to three inches.

TFSR: *So, within the legal limit, not long enough to be able to stab someone in the heart. That's generally the measure of it, three to four inches. Does Alex have a history of stabbing people?*

LO: He did not have any type of record like that whatsoever. He went seven years doing this type of work with no documented or recorded incidences at all.

MEGHAN: The press tore him apart and then kind of dropped the story because the trial didn't happen for another year and a half.

LO: All throughout this time, he was under gag orders. I don't know if that has necessarily been talked about a lot. That actually happened right before his trial. He was under a gag order that he wasn't aware of, and he had done a podcast

with Ian Higgins. They tried to put him in jail because of that podcast before his trial. It was a couple of weeks before his trial... I think it was September of 2022 and he thought he was fine. He didn't know.

I kind of interpreted that as the prosecutors wanted certain optics. It looks different when you walk into court from your home in a suit than it does if you're coming from jail in a jumpsuit. Those kinds of incidences peppered his trial. It was just constant like, "Okay, what bad thing is gonna happen next? How is this gonna go wrong next?" It was brutal. There were times where it was just brutal.

TFSR: *The way that the support site talks about the way the media had talked about Alex beforehand is almost like: when someone is injured by the police, and it becomes public knowledge the media oftentimes gets a bunch of information from the police department saying that "This person was caught smoking pot once and this one neighbor of theirs says that they don't like them!" Just tearing the individual apart. The support site talks about how they went back through his social media and we're making accusations of intent towards violence and extremist ideology.*

Is there any of that that you can talk about a little bit?

MEGHAN: It came up at the trial. They literally used his social media posts to say that it was intentional, that this was his plan all along, that he was filled with rage and hate, and that this was his 'great plan' to stab two people once the fight broke out that he didn't start, and it was going to be heavily recorded based on his location.

LO: These were memes that many liberals were sharing, leftists were sharing, these memes were being shared all over the country by 1000's of people at the time. There was one point, I can't guarantee that this was actually the case, but it almost seemed as if the judge thought Alex invented the meme. He went on this whole thing about 'the sanctity of Bugs Bunny,' and 'how dare the defendant do this?' Like along those lines. That's how this went.

TFSR: *Was it one of the Bugs Bunny's in a tuxedo and doing this? Okay. It's important to stand up for the sanctity of Bugs Bunny in that situation. [Sarcasm]*

LO: He didn't create it.

TFSR: *How long did the trial last? And what was he convicted of and sentenced to?*

MEGHAN: It was technically just three days of actual trial. There was one day of jury selection, the beginning, and then the sentencing was on Friday, which took about half a day for the jury to deliberate.

LO: They actually did it during a working lunch. We went out to lunch because we thought we had time. It was literally a five-minute walk down the street. We had to leave right away because they had a verdict so fast.

At the time, it was Assault in the first degree, Attempted assault in the first degree, Assault in the second degree, Attempted assault in the second degree, and Possession of a weapon. That was carried over from the thing we were talking about earlier. During sentencing, the attempted got...

MEGHAN: They are considered lesser charges. So, the attempted were not considered in sentencing. But he got a consecutive sentence. So, he was sentenced to 12 years for Assault one, and then eight years for Assault two.

LO: Then with five years parole. He's 40 years old, so if you do the math, that means all of this would end theoretically, when he's 65, which is retirement age.

MEGHAN: There was nothing mandating this length of sentence, while it does fall under the guidelines and it's not the maximum, the judge absolutely chose to sentence him consecutively. Compared to other things, you can use your vehicle to kill somebody, they're not coming back, that is permanent damage and get less than 20 years.

TFSR: *As you've pointed out, this is a clear instance of somebody interceding when violence was already occurring in order to stop the violence from occurring.*

Were there any convictions of folks from the Proud Boy or other groups that were present there? Sometimes I've seen a prosecutor try to make a 'both sides' approach towards altercations and go after members of the Right and then pick up some people on the Left just to say, "Look, we're not biased against you." Is that something that you saw around the same time here?

LO: No. Unfortunately. There were two incidences like that, but they definitely did not have the same weight. So, the first one was an individual who was like a MAGA guy. He was the only one that got searched and arrested that day. He hit one of the counter-protesters in the eye with a flagpole, almost poked her eye out, actually. Then the initial aggressor, proud boy with the taser, he was identified two months later by a coworker, and I think he served 30 days of community service. That was about it.

MEGHAN: It was an illegal Taser at the time in New York State. It was Police grade, so it wasn't even something that he could have picked up on a nice drive to Vermont.

TFSR: *As opposed to the perfectly street legal knife that somebody had in their pocket, that is a tool.*